Education for Person or for Nation?

A reflection of School: The Story of American Public Education

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To deeply understand the American public education today, we should always track back to its origin. The book School: The Story of American Public Education not only provided a brief introduction of the history of public education, but also put forward a question: What’s the purpose of education?

One thing didn’t change since 18th century is the idea of “Education for All”, but the intention behind it has endured a continuous shifting from protecting democracy of Jefferson to learning-by-doing of Dewey, from life-adjustment to global competition. What I have seen are two sides of educational purpose: individual improvement and national development. Sometime the public education turned close to one while other times it aimed at the other.

When Jefferson came up with the idea of common public schools, he just wanted to “raking a few geniuses from the rubbish”\(^1\) so that these people would “serve the country as he had done”\(^2\). Although his proposal didn’t refer to any women or slaves, it was still radical at that time and I can’t believe it was turned down three times. It was obvious that Jefferson’s proposal aimed at the national development, especially in political aspects. But we cannot deny that he and Mann “set in motion a dynamic that would eventually secure a place in school for every American child”\(^3\).

In the early 20th century, Dewey’s exposition of “learning by doing” which derived from his understanding of psychology as well as social evolution, advocated child-centered schooling that demonstrated “a highly individualized approach built around children’s interests”\(^4\). The progressive education emphasized more on individual interests and development. Later progressive education was criticized of low academic achievement and I think the reason was that there wasn’t any good way to measure what children had learned through progressive education and the assessment used most was summative.

In the same era IQ test was used to qualify students in order to “educate different people differently”\(^5\). I can understand that they were not pretending some groups of people from higher education on bad purpose, because they just wanted to give the appropriate education that “suited” everyone better. To me the purpose behind that is to maximize the social educational resources, which demonstrated the time when collective interest surpassed the individual interest. At that time the develop of

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American is far more important than individual development, especially facing the Soviet rocket pressure during the Cold War. The Soviet rocket made the education shifted again to the national purpose.

The issues of segregated and unequal education reached its peak in the late 20th century. Regardless of the pursuit of liberal social policies and control over education system, desegregation began with the pursuit of academic excellence for minorities, which means the educational purpose was closer to individuals than nations. That doesn’t mean the individual and national development is opposite. I can tell the great benefit of desegregation on America’s democracy. The history of American public education is one of democratic triumph while it has been less successful by another measure of access to knowledge and skills to which all democratic citizens are entitled and obliged. The publication of “A Nation At Risk” not only increased graduate requirements and added more tests, but also resulted in putting public education into market competition with the hope that public schools will improve themselves under the pressure of competition. I think that was another shift to the national purpose because giving parents opportunity to choose schools somehow enlarged the gap between different schools, so the nation could have more excellent intelligent while not every child could get high-quality education. That’s why the author asked at the beginning of the book “Is education primarily a consumer good or a common good?” Education was constructed originally to promote more social class mobility, but nowadays in the “education market” children from higher class have more opportunity for better education, which made the social class more solid.

I am not saying that the educational purpose for person is opposite to that for nation. Actually, I believe if everyone can be well educated then everyone can contribute more to build a better nation. And if the nation is well developed either economically or politically, it will have more power and funds to support public education.

As we can see from the history of American public education which is the nation’s most significant, but still evolving achievement, sometimes there were conflicts between two purposes. However, most of the time the educational purpose shifted from one to another and vice versa so both individual and nation could develop and make a mutual effect on each other.

How we educate the young decides the future for the whole nation. Why education evolution or revolution usually lags behind that of economy or policy is because the elder deliberate about the education while the young shape our country. Not only should we find a balance between two educational purposes, but we must make a connection between them in order to achieve the development of both sides.

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